Marconi's daughter sends out distress call about collection

[LONDON] The archives of Guglielmo Marconi (right), the inventor of wireless communication, which had been due for auction in April, are expected to be withdrawn from sale in the wake of a public outcry that included complaints from Marconi's daughter Elettra.

Some 1,000 individual lots, including prototype wireless equipment, documents, photographs and letters, which make up the Marconi Collection, were threatened with dispersal by public auction at Christie's, London, on 24 and 25 April.

But the sale now seems unlikely to go ahead, and a statement from the collection's owners, General Electric Company, which absorbed the Marconi company in 1968, says that discussion is taking place with the Science Museum in London and other parties in a bid to find a solution "which will ensure that the Marconi Collection remains intact and in this country".

Marconi moved to London in 1896 to patent his wireless telegraphy, which had been dismissed in his native Italy, and in the following year registered his Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company. He continued his research in England, and in 1901 successfully received a transatlantic radio signal in St John's, Newfoundland, that had been transmitted in morse code by a colleague in Cornwall, England.

Until this demonstration, radio waves had been received over 80 miles apart, and many scientists believed the waves would be unable to follow a longer curve around the Earth's surface. Marconi shared the Nobel prize for physics in 1909.

Marconi's work provided the foundation of today's terrestrial and satellite broadcasting, sea, air and cellular communications, space travel and radar. Last month, Christie's announced that their auction offered bidders "a unique chance to own a piece of the early days of the global communications industry".

But the news of the intended sale stirred up a flurry of comment in *The Times* newspaper, including letters from Marconi's daughter, Princess Elettra Marconi-Giovanelli, John Sutherland, the former managing director of Marconi Radar, the historian Lord Briggs, and archivists and wireless enthusiasts. The main criticism was that the value of the archive derives from its size and breadth, requiring that it be kept intact.

The collection, housed in Great Baddow, near Chelmsford, Essex, is closed to the public, but available for academic study. It includes such items as one of the first commercial wireless receivers, Marconi's diary recording the historic 1901 radio transmission, and a 'Marconigram' sent from the sinking liner Titanic in April 1912.

Christie's said last week that it is waiting for further instructions from General Electric. A spokesman from the company refused to specify the solutions being considered, but said that a final decision on the collection's fate, likely to include withdrawing it from public sale, is expected soon. **Claire O'Brien**